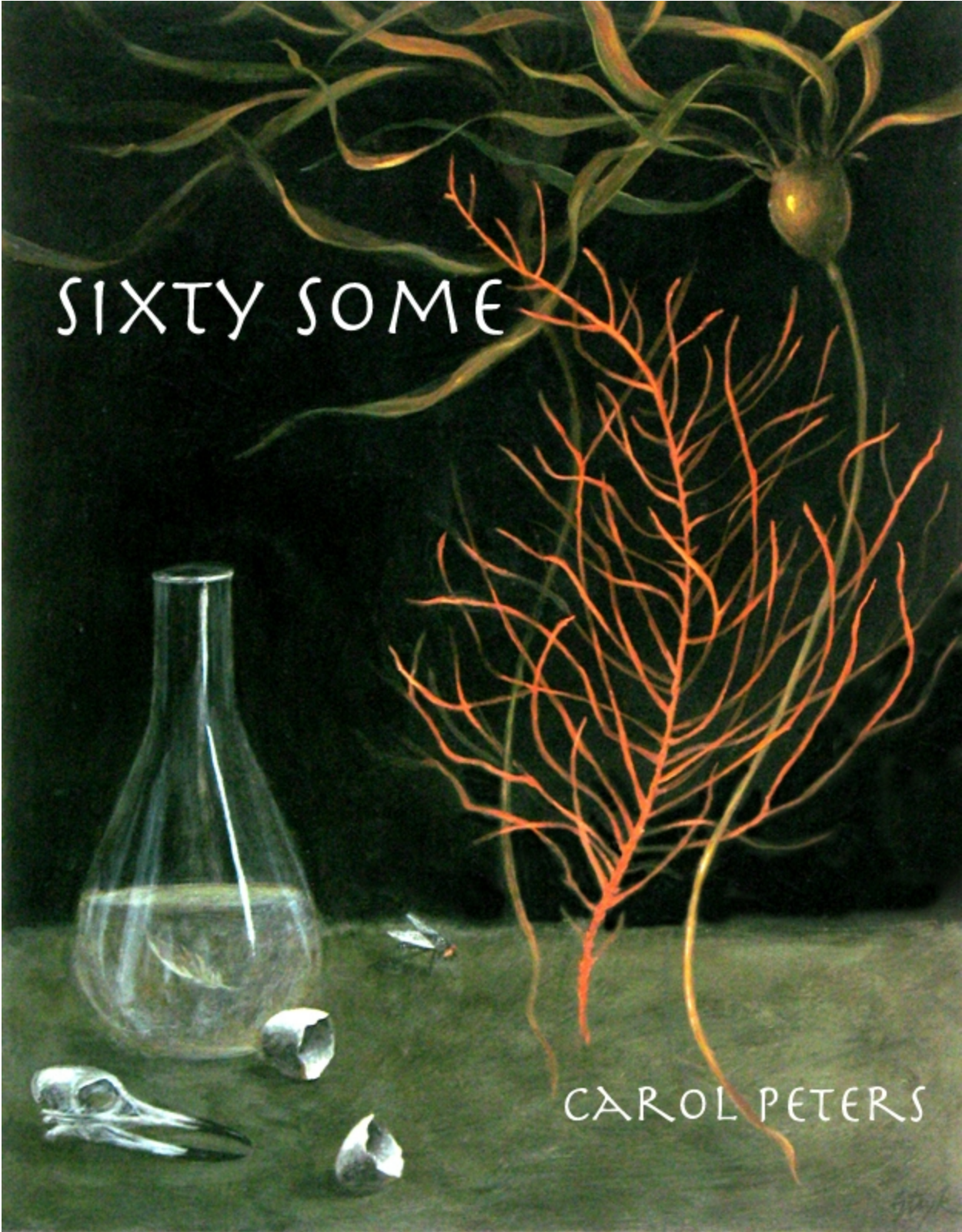




SIXTY SOME

CAROL PETERS

Sixty Some

by Carol Peters

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A Canto for Mae West

I knew there was a fox in the female heart
sheerly shameless in its heat
as time would reveal.

At first there was an all-pervading smell of
fish.
Blowflies — plump glittery hovering specks of green —
grazed any woman with that smell.

I edged closer
having wondered (since birth) at my aroma and
wanting to graduate to this.

The man —
patriarch husband or king — who had been our containment
was cleanly clocked by the package of Mae West
whose chutzpah engendered us (we measure time
in moonflowers)
who — nun or hussy — planted her body bosom and thigh
rampant, because it would flagrantly be soundtracked and screened.

I knew that the draped could be duped, and this
self, unveiling, could shatter women's shackles.

I knew
that Mae West's bravado turned men craven.

Thus was a fox in my heart — a female heart —
and I would contrive shameless
until I was pure through.

About me would be a smell of fish
and a future where females fly.

A Child Wonders Why My Auntie Fell in the Sea at Hilo

Because we are haole, greeters at St. Joseph's
lei us and embrace us. Aunt Mary
misses the font but grounds a knee, queues
for communion, can't hear but mimes the song.

Because an acolyte glides toward the altar
bearing a wooden cross, my face betrays me.
Aunt Mary doesn't see. *The eye cannot
say to the hand I have no need of you.*
I sit as they rise to chant, humble to pray.
I wait for benediction, wash of the sea.

Because Mary wants her trousers rolled
she wades in the shallows, stumbles, cries out
and falls in front of a child, then fails to rise.
I pull her up. She gasps and says I pushed her.

All You Children and This a Mad House

The girl who won't stop wailing
squeezes past the man

who's hauling up the stairs
the boy who won't walk.

His head bounces — thwack
of a melon but louder —

his face purples, his shirt rucks
to the neck, his spine bruises

balusters his hands flail for.
The girl howls till it's noise

the mother puts a stop to.

Along the Hull

Under silken lids
his eyes are swollen.
He's kissing the women
but he misses her.
She is tapping
along the hull
now that he is leaving.

She starts to hear music
above her inner music —
imitates a line.
She can hear her song
while watching others
failing to fathom.

Argyll Tour

Glasgow

Treed infants
mushroom-studded springs
a fenced colt named “Biter”

diesel-smoked canals
seagull froth, tallow broth
trays of drying dates, barge chatter
rust-weakened chains

— but of you, nothing —

tuna bobbing in waves
sleep
long-playing mice
ribald laughter

— until you appear —

dearest, I’m your slave
hobble me.

— *Eugenio Montale*

Aubade

I wake to a dream bird
melodious mocker
and guilt. I'm late.

Kingfishers
bound by orange ribbons
chitter and chee from posts
shimmer like boasts
above the glare
dive to snare
fillets of shine.

One of me dresses
the other forgets
to rise.

*In this vernal season
... it were an injury
and sullenness against nature
not to go out*

The tide is high
a rowboat
(borrowed and splintered)
slides from a spongy bank
is buoyed by drift
rocked by swell. It can welcome
my weight
unslip its oars . . .

Aunt Naked

My aunt enters the room naked, waving
a lit cigarette. "Who wants hot dogs
who wants hamburgers, and how many?"
My cousin flips her comic book page
but doesn't look. I can't stop
looking. I have never seen breasts
full like pockets, nipples crinkled and red.
Below her belly a black vee aims
between thighs as creased and rumpled
as sheets before bed-making. My aunt
takes our orders, breathes a ring of smoke
and tilts away in jewel-toed slippers
her puckery bottom jiggling like pudding.
She's off to ask our brothers.

A Whale's Pace

Because the whales are slow to reach the prison yard
pitiful syllables echo off guard towers.

Because the whales are slow to circumnavigate
nightingales start jamming.

Because the whales are slow tonight
the market's closing, it will cost you nothing to witness the breach.

Becoming Donald Trump

Christmas brings the boy
a video game.
Destroying foe by foe
he gains the sanctum.

Inside the senior home
he finds TVs
and a view of Donald Trump
in black tie —

the man owns every
video game
and gorgeous women —
might he loan one?

Gramps pours coffee.
Granny's breathing
airs a smell, a whisper
“Why am I here?”

The boy pays no mind
to failing kin.
He will be returned
to the foster home.

Bobbing Along

Sometimes when I feel
older than the hills
thinner than the rails
they tore out the year
after Grandma died
I cook up a stew
by throwing in everything
but the kitchen sink
including that red robin
the cat dragged in
fresh from the garden
a taste of spring.
While eating my fill
I sing my heart out.

Briefly Met

I was the egghead
never-going-to-be-asked-for-a-date
at a public high school
where he was the frequently-suspended.

Weaving through crowds toward second period
I'd catch sight of him and flinch
as he powered along, thrift-shop briefcase swinging
his expression grim or bemused.

I knew he would swerve
to wind up and slam that briefcase into my shins
my elbows, the backs of my knees, leave bruises
that made me clutch myself, glare at the freak —

my brother — trying to comprehend
his only sense of tender.

Bubble and Pop

At dawn the old man's up and at midnight, down-
wind of the tarp
flapping, a sail
swollen with winter's lunge and bruising. Gallons of sap
filling the pot
start to simmer —
sugary bubble and pop — the fire to tend, the sudden
burps abandoning
kettle for ground
melted gaps in dirty drifts, the rims congealing.
Forest duff
smarts his eyes
as an owl hoots by. Too old to keep a job that pays
he wouldn't suit one
a house and a wife
harvest of a life — bubble and pop — his next stop
a swirl of Saturn's
rainbow dust
far from the tug of Vermont, its cold wind and hungry fire.
Dip the ladle
test the drops —
not thick, not ichor yet. An hour and mapling season will end
like summer ends
the late tomatoes
seeded and canned — flames to warm the long winter.
He conjures heaven
how close it is.

Circulatory

The ice storm spins
a holly berry
a chrysalis.

Digesting the jewel
a stellar jay
sails the slough.

Swelling and growing
gems recrystallize
to understory.

Fuel for my axe.

Coffee Picking

Under this sky of gray cloud
Mary's not wearing sunscreen
only the "Big Dog" sweatshirt
muddy brown pants
rubber boots with green soles.
She and Mike are picking coffee
berries from beaded branches
and the dogs, tired from leaping
lie watching from wet grass.
What does a dog think
of people stripping bitter beans
from tall bushes?
Mary's not wearing a hat
under this sky shifting
from gray to blue, the light from soft
to golden. Around Mike's neck
a dirty string suspends a bowl
half-full of berries.
Mary drops hers
straight into the bucket.
When she needs a rest
she'll tell Mike she's dizzy
but only because she forgot
and turned her head too quickly.
See? She's fine now
to continue. Mike knows
how to listen. Don't we need
a simple reason for why we're not
the way we want to be —
why we're creased instead of smooth
why our back is bent
not straight, why we stumble
and don't remember?
Beyond the dogs, the farm,
the sea, familiar, shimmers.

Dreams of Potatoes

In dreams, potatoes dig their way up to the soil's surface
open their eyes.

Rain finds them silt-steeped.
Faded flowers go by.

In potato dreams butter and salt do not figure.
Skins blush in the naked air.

The finest potato is eaten by the twelve-wired bird of paradise
bulges like a jewel in her throat.

A child fits the small potatoes into egg cartons.
Their green dismantles light.

White potato, sweet potato, three potato, four.
Root for darkness. Wake.

Full-Blown

Slope-shouldered eyes
pocked cloud

a mile-long
slant of lip
fissures

Aeolus —
your moon face.

Hawaii 9/11

You had gone
saying, There's nothing
we can do.
I feared dying
and when the hillside shook
I started to run.

*Had we been forewarn'd . . .
by dire example . . .
by what befell?*

Down the hundred steps
was icy water
where spiders in webs
belayed between
the knobbled stones
awaited prey.

I catwalked upstream
lay sore and sweating
in a rock's hard hollow
(shroud for body
socket for skull)
imagined you not returning.

If Blue

If blue were something to eat blue would
 taste new then vanish

 refresh like water
but not water something keener

 would coat like lotion
melt from lips and tongue

 renew in the throat
would shimmer along the esophagus

 fill the belly for hours ease through

would light each organ flush clear
 every impurity all wounds

 traverse bowels on feet furred
 like butterflies like bees

 the remnants would fog
the body's mirror release

 a glow pinwheel down then up
would be rinsed blue.

I Hear Mary in the Carport

crying out
when Mia tries to knock her down.

I warn her —
if she pats Mia
I'll lock the dog up.

She looks at me as if I'm crazy —
how can she pat the good dog
and not the bad dog?

I say which would you prefer —
the dog locked up
or a broken hip?

Mary says
that's a really difficult question.

In the Greenhouse

The lemon's roots
are awash with moles.
A spatter of drops
bead the sickle's steel.

Apple and quince blaze
cochineal. The pony
shies at the comb —
my dream erodes.

Dazed and buoyant
I'm soaked with you
exhaling your form
absorbing your face.

God's scant measure
showers few —
putti with harps and
drums rumble and blaze

at me — at lemons — at you.

— *Eugenio Montale*

In the Park at Caserta

Against a green stage on a glass pond
where the cruel swan preens and arches

bubbles break — one bubble, ten —
a fire from below — ten fires.

A sun staggers skyward
over Norfolk pines, their verdigris crowns

and crooked nubs unravel like jungle vines
stony arms that sculpt anyone —

strangers — unseat, unsex.
Knuckles bloodied, the Mothers probe the deep.

— *Eugenio Montale*

Investment

By turning away
 she's not rejecting him.
It's familiar, cumulative, but temporary
 yet in its summarily remote
 calculation fond.
The bed
 shudders.
Panic shimmers.
The preferred option is
 to wait
 and see.
She compounds disfavor by
 forecasting a next
 time.
She asks to be held
 even as she declines to
 capitulate.
It is that castle keep
 that interest, that exposure, those
 hours per week, that inequality
 that transience, that misalignment.
All things missing or withheld
 bring returns.

It Is Time to Explain Myself

I am a free companion
let us stand up

crescent child that carries its full mother in its belly
stand by the curb prolific

udder of my heart
cushion me soft

life is a suck and a sell
what is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is me
no sweeter fat
walks with the tender and growing night

agonies are one of my changes
gibberish of the dry limbs

miracle enough to stagger
I am not contained between my hat and my boots

whirling is elemental

I will do nothing for a long time but listen
turn and live awhile with the animals
they who piddle and patter

stucco'd with quadrupeds
I have instant conductors all over me
moth and the fisheggs
a hummer and a buzzer
fish-smack pack

he most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher

— *after Walt Whitman*

I Visit My Father's Ward

To him fall the damaged children
wished for or not
offspring born with brains
too small or miswired
unable to speak or speaking too much
catatonic or never still, even sleeping
children kept for a time as infants
until too much drooling
bodies that don't grow or don't walk
or arch, like the boy my father calls Cricket
a tight-strung bow in a crib
where he sings his song.

Bound by straps to chairs
gripping walkers and canes
parked in wheelchairs — canvas, leather, and steel
squirming or limp on bedding
hung in swings
and wild with longing, every child
will wave, warble, bark, clap, rock and pound the floor
cry "Me" and "Doctah" and "Wa-wa-wa"
until my father caresses and says their names.
When he gentles Cricket with his palm
long slow swaths down chest and belly
the song rises.

I stand in the doorway
afraid of all these strangers.

Lightning

(bloom and boom)
I ran up
the driveway

my body
ahead
of my feet

when the strike
filled the sky
with silver

Lowcountry Chat

Who said “Check out the hips on
that tree”? Hip-hippy-trunkulating-
up-to-a-crotch where the flare out
startles. Who said “That tree's lost
its fool head”? Knuckle-cracking fingers
spring-leaving to green and yellow lace,
all hips and torso and arms but no face.
“Lucky you live in the swamp, Tree. In a lawn
Tree, you'd be chain-sawed and wood-mauled.”
What Tree says is “I'm counting on roots
wider than my upside is tall.” Whoever said
“Love of money is the root of all evil” knows zip
about roots. Mud, locally known as Pluff
feels them grow their way through spartina.

Mandoo Soup at Onekahakaha Park

I taste the kimchi, the pork
pinched inside a dumpling
slurp the cloudy broth.

I chopstick ribbons
of curdled egg, chew slivers
of bamboo and zucchini.

I'm swallowing seaweed
when a trade wind wheels
the soup container's plastic lid

downslope toward the beach
— a top's fandango —
but I'm lava-benched, beguiled

by plover squealings, mynah sass
turquoise breakers, humpback froth
not ready to chase my trash.

Mockingbird

A Bird stood on my sill today —
One I have seen before —
And sang its Anthem — gay and bold —
I could not charge my ear

To voice the key — nor tune my throat
To play its Melody —
Nor cavalierly, tilt my tail —
Mimic its Equipoise —

But later — in the Tub — afloat —
I lather bubbled sheen
That reconditions me — now Bird —
Here comes — my joyful Noise

Morning After

The pinwheel
sling of Kali's arms
lures the child to the lawn.

Water needles
the costume she wears
to scare herself.

Squatting over punched steel
she dams the flow.
Trickles grow

to hammers.
Not a mark shows
she's been stung.

Not until her ears ring
her limbs freeze
will she end it.

Muir's Sailing

Seeking a route to California
Muir sailed from Havana to New York
on a tar-and-oakum fruiter.

The hold was loaded with oranges, the deck
filled up level with the rails.
They walked on boards over gold.

The captain, five crew and the passenger
dined as one on salt mackerel and plum duff
and oranges.

Near the south coast of Carolina
head winds drenched the ship: of course
the load of oranges suffered.

The captain's Newfoundland
jumped from a dozing sleep to capture flying fish
fluttering in oranges.

In calm sea and calm sky a dolphin
pursued the flock, dashed into the midst
and feasted on fallout.

Holding a rope on the bowsprit
Muir almost forgot
that walking on seas was forbidden.

He marveled at breaking waves of phosphorescent light.
O, to walk by night
with every star pictured in its bosom.

My Next Otter

My mother sat, her one eye blind
watching the river rushing for the dam
her monster —

its balustrades of winter ice. She tallied
red mergansers, said her otter drifted
belly up

gobbling a fish, edging nearer the brink
then preened its paws and swam upriver.
This December

my otter's head appears in the marsh
trolling for prey. Times I sat on the sill
near her hoping

to see the sable curl, the rounded snout
the duck's rout. But my next otter's head
wasn't sleek —

no — matted, its jaws around a silver fish
heaving, alive. It dove at my approach
my kind.

Night Swim at Folly

On the bridge to Folly Beach —
midspan — a wooden cross
a limp flag, fresh blooms
a bottle in a brown bag.
'That's one reason he passed —
drinking and driving too fast —
but also the fight, their last
because he was to die soon.

A burring sound of tires
on grates before the car
veered into the concrete rail
exploded through.
Moored in pluff mud boil
a man underwater
in pitch dark, where
his fate was to die soon.

His friends steal flowers
from local parks — reds
and forget-me-not blues.
'They wish he'd kissed his lover
and nixed that final beer.
'They imagine he said
I'm screwed, but then
tried not to die so soon

by flailing at the door —
or had he floored it and steered
for the taste of black water,
wanted to die, soon?

No Souls

The vulture lands, his long wings fan the air
above a flattened mate.

Her head — leprous, bare
and red — twists to touch him, bill-on-bill.

How can this necrous pair connect
while clinging to a spar between two poles?

And how can songless birds
sway to a rapturous rhythm but have
no souls?

Perhaps
an egg quickens. Spent
the pair opens their serrated spans
to heaven, miming angels. Hours lapse
as fever slakes and vigor streams
to wingtips now resembling hands.

Odysseus Adopts His Ancient Aunt

Hold on, Penelope says, as again Odysseus rises
to leave her behind in the great rooted bed. Get wise.

I'm wed to your seagoing lust but not to your aged aunt.
She's your family, so take her. He's aghast.

How to sail so obscenely burdened? But his aunt is eager:
I can adjust to any situation. Hand me an oar

a tiller, a spear. Can't you suit me up in armor?
Give me a chore: net mender, mast climber

flail finder. She's lame, practically deaf and blind
gap-toothed, purple-skinned, losing her mind.

To keep her from harm, Odysseus locks the hag in the hold
but fails to warn his crew of ill-fortune about to unfold:

beetles infest the barley, drinking water spoils
sheep and goats bloat on oats and the honey spills

riggings fray as tempers boil. Aeolus harries
the ship with winds that shift from doldrums to furies.

It's all their captain's fault for bringing aboard a dame
for tugging. She's my aunt, he claims. She's ancient!

But crewmen whisper she's a white-armed maid. Minutes
before the mutiny, Odysseus opens the hatch, issues

the crone a helmet and greaves, a blade to field the blows.
The crew falls back amazed as the old lady shows

what she's made of: her challenged spine taller by inches
her clouded eyes colder than memories, she lunges

at the shamed and humbled foe. Untouched by counter sting
she tumbles down, bloodied she is dying.

Old Woman Wears Falling Apart Underpants

old woman wears falling apart underpants
not willing to buy new for nothing flappy butt in floppy sack
eats food found deep in hard-to-reach cupboards
apricots she peels apart and soaks in warm water from the tap
tongues and sucks their sweetness spits leather skeletons onto cracked plates
better — believe me — than assisted living saucily monitored decline
one hears of old persons wandering off the scare of a parent gone missing
ancients torn apart by wild dogs better — believe me — than managed care
unbalanced diet made worse by finding huckleberries along the back fence
eating them all half-ripe before the thieving birds find them plus the peaches
the neighbor drops by along with two perfectly ripe Better Boys
oh those young boys for a few hours the underpants sag around the ankles
while she reads her way through decades-old *New Yorkers* in the upstairs loo
she keeps them all better — believe me — than paying for new
after a while the stories feel like a part of her she only needs reminding
for a week she swears off fresh fruit
works her way through the canned goods tuna baked beans capers
before Lucy takes her to the store the shopping cart fills with strong flavors
olives bacon three pounds of carrots raw Lucy won't let her pay
for as long as the loaf lasts she'll feast on peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches
all the nutrition a body needs between two slices of wholewheat bread
then back to the dried fruit food that tastes and keeps
old woman prefers to put off sleep better to reread the old stories
than watch TV the same kind of people live and laugh and love and fall sick
and die without sponsors or hired minders she resists the idea
that anyone should try to help her better — believe me — to hang solo
that's why it comes as such a surprise to all of us who know her
when her body sickens the rest falters too she sags easily into our hands
it's the strange wolf that frightens her her spirit that crumples first

Passing for Love

Because he asks me, I visit —
a small apartment after a long ride.
My father's minding a toddler, blue-eyed.

A winter sun streams through bare windows.
He's disheveled, seems older
— says he's sober.

I can't find a place to settle
refuse a cup of coffee. He wants to talk
but I can't speak.

The child, laughing, pushes a boat
along the couch. My father raises his hand
and lets her sail all over him.

Penance

When guilt comes to you as Custer
bearing his slaughtered troops, his brothers
one by one from circle to circle of hell

you must share his burden, reach across
for the scalped head of one, the hacked torso
of a second, the left boot, shattered foot

rotting, of a third. Custer will tell you how
the time spent in a circle depends on whether
perversity or blasphemy or greed

dogged the soldier before he took an arrow
to his heart. Whether you have denied a beggar
or mocked a god or molested a she-goat

devils will run you down, stay and torture you
because you are alive, a superior target
for flaying, searing, drowning in gore.

What have you done, you cry, that you
are so consumed by another man's failing?
O my brother. O fallen man.

Prince Charming

Your mother
— Queen of Pearls —

prefers orchids
to the axles

she oils to prevent
your rusted

caravan
from screaming

witless profanities
at Planet Earth.

Provincetown Crossing

Ropes unfurl from cleats, the grumbling screws
rotate the ferry's hull, propel the bow
to cleave the harbor. Epauletted in blue
the pilot steers the bell to blinker route
toward open sea. Passengers may queue
for fizzy drinks and salty snacks.
Sunday crosswords offer subtle clues
to bundled lovers. Restless travelers tack
from lee to starboard, back from bow to stern.
They've wired their heads, implanted buds in ears
each glance surveys the ocean's tumble and turn
their torsos swivel and slide to rhythms heard.
The crew is dozing: idle hands and mind.
An autopilot drives the ferry blind.

Rosetta Stone

A liquid blacktop nozzle
transcribes the county road —
winter heaves
vehicular crashes.

The artist loops
and glob-stops
mimes and surges.

The zigzagged text
resists a supervisor
but the code
will harden.

Salt Marsh Dawning

Our window noticed, broke open like news.
There was no news, only night, paling.

Beads slingshot up from pines to blueing
double down to glassy bands of steel.

The steel grows crimson bolts between grasses
mohawked in green, brown, and golden.

Previewed by rays, the crown ascends minutely.
Drawn, the blue capitulates and is morning.

Bare day blinds, insists the steel. Our eyes
drift from the sight on a light-strewn breeze

reconfigure the patchwork to gulls
skimming water, contrails stitching sky.

Scars

*removed back of ear
took one chunk from neck one chunk from arm
used them to reconstruct the ear*

The cancer excised
after months of crusting and weeping.

A woman with breast cancer once bound
her excrescence in cloths
under her dress
until the breast grew to an awful size
or burst.

My brother's ear festered for months
under his HMO.

*cut on neck is stretched so pesky
and ear's sore*

In Milton's day the king ordered
the ears of Puritans cut off
their faces branded with marks of Judas.

Will the new ear feel cricks?
The urge to lift heavy objects?

I'm considering a beer

A proto-ear fumbles for an opener.

Scotch

what we no longer drink
aside from thimblefuls
on special occasions

what we do with yearnings
for things forsworn
cheese and Coca-Cola

what Campbell's calls a broth
made from beef
and onion, carrots and barley

what fills the tape dispenser
mends the tear
sets the spicurl

what we draw in the sand
a matrix of lines, girls
queueing to hop over

what flavors the stew
an orange bonnet
Latins call a habanero

what we spray on upholstery
to guard against spills
food fights, accidental sex

what a knife makes
an opening
to enter or leave by

Second Burial

I hoe vees.
I seed kale.
I miss her fingerbones.

She thumbbed holes
out-of-kilter lines
made harlequin maps.

No remains —
tufts, nails and teeth —
all ebbed to meal.

I loiter at the fruiting rows.
I skirt abandoned beds.

Seeing Kilauea

Steam geysers from vents.
We stop the car to peer
through chain-link fence
(butts and coins —
tourist-tossed)

at gaps in lava, places
where rocks are shifting.
Mary asks if it's fog
or smoke. The air is thin —
she begins to cough.

Red blooms of *'ohi'a*.
I steer past grays
and blues, sheer caldera
sulfur-white frost.
Pu'u, I say —

cone where lava spouts.
Pahoehoe — slabs of lava
smooth and black
or bulging, pleated
spiral mounds.

A'a — the other lava
acres of reddish scree.
Eruptions that cover, burn
and smother. Nearly home
we pass men working —

fencing a field.
Mary says, Look, farmers.
They've built a fire.
It's fog, I say
washing out Mauna Kea.

Seen Driving from Chapel Hill to Charleston

I would not live on Pope Road or in Clinton town
would not work at Cafe Risque
would not take my vacation at a Holiday Inn
or send my children to the Falcon Children's home
but I would stop to neck at mile 69
travel to New York on a Lionel train.
I say yes to the free hot breakfast and coffee 24-hours a day
no to marrying a soldier trained at Fort Bragg.
I'd rather not be tickled pink South of the Border.
24-hour gas sounds painful.

Shade

The canopy's
half-light
wraps our love
in silence.

In heathers
and pines
our fervors
decline.

Drop your eyes
hold yourself
let go of
desire.

Breeze, come
sweetly
grass, sway
at our feet.

We'll wait
for evening
the nightingale
and singing.

— *Paul-Marie Verlaine*

Sol, Sol

Sun, sun, hot and gold.
The orc with ivories
slow-rides the breakers.
Spray, gassy and whetted
lures him past the swell.
Surge howlers skim by
on balearic backbones
with cockle-cream ribbons
and high-tossed domes.
Fly Barracuda, Aphyraena.
The orc skates the tube.
Steam trumpets power
tappets for the knell
pearling round oysters
and marbled copper bells.
Fly Anemone, Dauphina.
The orc beams the curl.
The fathoms glimpse
high noon. Gilled in amber
a fish plum sieves drift
and balm from the drench.
Fly Manatee, Sirenia.
The orc with ivories
bites the drums
barrel rolls a double curl
in spray's green dice —
snake eyes.

Speciation

happens slowly, Darwin says
when climate or tectonic shifts or viral pandemics
alter the space, kill off what can't
and favor what can survive. Phebe brightens.
Like the modern urban squirrel, she says
unlike the squirrels of my childhood —
dying under the wheels of cars.
Watch the squirrels now — they pause at curbs.
Don't they seem to listen? Look
Phebe says, that's speciation
in less than geological time. No,
says Darwin, those squirrels haven't evolved.
It's only that the deaf ones died.

Spring Yields

The heads of day-old titmice are black holes, then white lines
etched on bodies sleeping. All but three
fade from the webcam.

The woodpecker mining ants from the pine doesn't see the squirrel
falling to earth, the red blood at its mouth
the end of its breathing.

One by one the rat snake feasts on bluebirds dragged from a box
nailed to a fence pole. Lumps in its throat
stagger its grounding.

The dutiful gleaners — yellow-jackets and emerald blow-flies
maggots freshly hatched — loot the sweet
remains of the season.

Storm Warning

It blows hard, listen, watch out for tornados!
The marsh tide's at flood, hours later riding high.
Wait — rain batters the window
birds in their nests, tilting from side to side.

Has the danger passed? Clouds dip and collide.
Oh! the bluebird house, torn from its post!
It blows hard, listen, watch out for tornados!

Has the commotion eased? Grackles still won't fly.
Wait — below the grasses, roots showing
reefs of oysters, a gull laughs and dives.
Aren't birds a sign that worrisome times are over?
It blows hard, listen, watch out for tornados!

String Along

her gowned sense
a masquerade
his fools's singlet
looped with flags

a dreamer she nags
for a queen's castle
till his staff batters
and the rafters boom

she plies the broom
a judy's fortune
grab your buttons
punch and run

The Earrings

In the lamp-black glass, not a shadow
of flight remains. (Of your trace, nothing.)
The golden hoops — fragile gleams
the sponge has sent packing.

I looked for your rocks, your corals
the strength that steals you.
I flee a goddess without shape.
When I say what I want, you burn me.

Outside a chitinous racket
bizarre rites canceling our existence.
Regaining the stage
the night's gentle medusas.

Your signal will flare from the deep.
At your lobes, hands without blood or bone
will fasten the corals.

— *Eugenio Montale*

The First Rabbit

When Lou's hand broke
the rabbit's neck
we studied our hands for lack
of calluses. Mike swung a buck

by the legs, said
good-bye before he raised
his mallet. His first swing failed
the next one dazed.

I cleavered head from torso
watched the muscles contort
the blood flow.
I peeled the coat

lopped the feet
gutted and rinsed the meat.
Later, we soaped away the sweet
reek of recent

death — deposits
of flesh and fat, our profit
of memory and sorrow — our habit
since that first rabbit.

The Great Blue Heron

My wakeup clock is the great blue heron
a strangled squawk from the great blue heron.

Flushed from a jack pine, the noise careens
to the nearest dock, it's the great blue heron.

Sunshine fires the pale breast, cerulean
shoulders and hocks on the great blue heron.

Most of a morning goes to flare and preen
and air the sockets of the great blue heron.

Ascending, the lengthening wings and body open
gravity's lock for the great blue heron.

Though ibises travel overhead in dozens
it's one to a flock with the great blue heron.

As moon swallows the marsh, fish are marooned
in shallows chock-full, O great blue heron.

Extended toes patently Groucho Marxian
ID the walk of the great blue heron.

The head cocks, the bill's a lethal weapon
for prey outstalked by the great blue heron.

When dusk falls, a shadow grays spartina
home to its hammock flies the great blue heron.

The Ibis and the Polychaete

Feeding at low tide an ibis inhaled
a polychaete — a leggy worm seen dabbing

an inconclusive calligraphic trail
in mud exposed by marshtide's ebb.

Yanked from its hiding place, the parapodial
snack extended like a rubber band

then snapped and pooled like mercury spilled
from curving bill to estuary ground.

Carcass-fed, how white the worm, how blind
how lame — with all those legs no wheels!

The immanent bill chased segments through the slime
swallowing, loop by loop, the slippery meal

then stilted on, bending now and again to dredge
another hapless squirmer from the sludge.

The Man Who Plays Piano at Nordstrom

parks his sedan on the shoulder and stands with his back
to the woods. He's burly, middle-aged, still wearing
his tuxedo — frayed suspenders dangle, the bow tie's loose.
His forearm's draped with folded plastic garbage bags.
Still, he's complaining — lips pinched, cheeks in a sag —
to a comely woman in crepe silk, pearled cardigan
and pleated slacks. She bends, sympathetic to his tirade
willing to enter the woods or drive farther, find a motel —
whatever he wants — but nothing, nothing suits him.

The Shapes of Flowers

Browsing flats, pushing a cart for company
I fondle stems and conjure the shapes of flowers —
triangle, circle, square, or spiral botanies —
without a care for sympathetic colors.

So borders clash! Our likes and dislikes change —
bright red exposes blue throughout the mauve
pale pink promotes the red inside the orange
ivory gossips to white, tattles at taupe.

Comrades, my garden romps in natural hues
the clumps and rows resemble social schemes —
here a yellow elbows aside chartreuse
there a cinnamon strongarms cream.

With shields held high — helmet, spear and torch
chalice, flag and trumpet storm my porch.

The Worms Mend

Beneath rain-soaked leaves
moss blankets the steps and risers.
I peel the green, uncover worms
of palest pink. Unused to light
and air, they Möbius-strip, unfurl.
I flip the broken pieces away
shuttle the broom back and forth
to bare the stones for drying.

At two a.m., Mike's coughing starts
subsides to barely wheezing. Awake
I raise the cotton sheet to catch
a breeze, escape my dreaming.
The night sweat eases. I curve to
the swell of his cold hip, donate
warmth to his sleeplessness, caress
his shoulder. Sorry, he says.

Don't worry, I say. I know
the worms mend and moss regrows.

Tropical Garden

Wasn't Emily plain and lonely
— most days —
didn't she love her bees

as I love
the fern frond
— green with a yellow fade —
and blue flowers
on a yellow-berried bush.

Rock pile
orchid, croton, ixora
— flesh and colors —
crowd and console me.

Wasn't Eve
— *roses bushing round her* —

lonely for the snake?

Tucked behind an Ear like an Ear of Corn

an interdisciplinary dolphin
yodels in a thermos

the adult doldrum's just a phylum
frosted in granulated sugar
the ice by the islet's speakered with reeds

an Archimedean pinkie
gets inside our earaches
a pugilistic insistence on quiet
or Russian

I should burgeon
during thunderstorms
a little stream
lipreading through the moving leaves
the smell of fresh scratches

music flows out from the center to the edge
fungible singers of the fainter ochers
even sound gets wet in rain

— *after Ange Mlinko*

Urban Owl

Was it a vole, a convoy of mice
a dropped glove decoyed the owl
down from a tree into light?
Its body a mammal's
barring the wings flung wide, the face
a heart, obsidian eyes
swiveling left and right at grass
smelling of earth, the faded human rag aside
nothing moving proving nothing
to eat, its prey
safe in snug holes or combing dumpsters
out of sight, the city quiet
midnight's patient hungry owl
captures air and flies.

Waking

Dawn doesn't come soon enough
to put a stop to dreaming.
Compared to action, what's so sweet about
shagging z's? Think greyhound — the gate
the anticipatory chomp

at the rabbit's
loin and the superstitious touts.
In night's fade, my feet itch
dreaming is pre-history. As for yawns
necessary, yes, but come one sound
they too are vaulting from the bed.
No fire, no hail, no siren call
but pumped and yearning, ready to gaze
rapt at the eyes of a sinking moon.

One clap
one lightning strike, one hypothetical
tune plays, and there it is — the raw
heartthrob of the new day, that tingle
in the ribs anticipating
the piccolo's whistle and wild hoarse
drone of the oboe, probing
the journey it was sculpted for.
The opening chord.

Listen, the day
wakes when it wakes. There's no delaying
the rollout. Rollup the carpet.
Hear the fibers furl, and outside — see?
night exits tapping tambourines, grace notes
in oyster, a flesh-colored band.

Water Burning

Come plunge your hands in this cone
of brush — invasive guava, agave

over-grown, hau deflowered
strangling ulu'i. Pluck from the meshes

branches and fronds, hazard them deep
beyond ash into ready coals.

How the thickety heap disguises
(grassy creep) its yen to burn.

How, flame as catalyst, devil's
sharpshooters fire the night alizarin.

What If I Buy You Lunch

Oh no, she said, paying for a woman
is not what you want to do, She felt how he pulled
away, tried not to. And why
must he say this to her? Who else

can know? She wants to say she suffers
loneliness. Hers is like his.
Would she buy love? How can she comfort
what does it mean to be a friend

these days? He's told her about his wife, his daughter
she knows, or she thinks she knows, he loves them.
Yet here they sit, two people at a conference

spending the hours between here and there, one meeting
and the next, nowhere
and he's lonely, might buy a whore.
She's his friend from work. What are they saying?

What Mike Saw

The tightly coiled spring
of the rat's tail — nine inches
tapering to a bent tip, furred
except where death burned it

legs ending in pink feet —
dainty, like monkey hands
convex soles with curling toes
the first and fifth sprung

like opposing thumbs
from heel to toe the foot as long
as the leg, a bead of urine
leaked from a gray tuft —

brown eyes and a pink nose
whiskers in four rows
and light-filled ears like breeze-filled
sails — an old man's lobes.

Where We Are

is where our digits press screens and keys to cabling
banding the bulge of the earth

am I a member of your tribe because
both of us work for self?

try not
to be as you might

breeding, location, education, lifestyle no longer
welding state to state

wherein you may not have bathed for a month
I am merely two days into not bathing

compost of billions
tell me of your dirt

mine spots a gray cotton T-shirt (small hole in the left armpit)
non-binding

over
checkered cotton shorts

material failures

at the folded edges
the float of the sight of things

age is less noticeable in pixels
O let us take our hand . . .

Whidbey Island Spoils

1

A crab has cracked, belly from back
its shell missing a wedge
lifted by wrack.

2

Some child's forgotten her Kermit
sifter clotted with sand
taken her bucket.

3

All gauze and ommateum, flies
guzzle at a Douglas fir's
tumultuous capsize.

4

A Golden Crackling sparkler grazes
a Pepsi-Cola can, a
flowerpot crazes.

5

Kelp macrames sticks and stones
pigeon guillemots scour
a salmon's bones.

Willem de Kooning, Untitled, 1988

Though not an ear
the space edged with blue
quicken a membrane listening.

An ear doesn't close its eye.
Whites and tomato flashes
enter unimpeded.

Threads of volume
nursed from the jigsaw knob
of the world tuning.

Through M-shaped folds
a cauliflower ear
trades suitable phrases.

The white ground
reminds us of not hearing.

Notes

“A Canto for Mae West” began as a Jon Anderson poem.

In “All of You Children and This a Mad House” *haole* is Hawaiian for “foreigner” and commonly refers to white people who visit or relocate to Hawaii.

The quotation in “A Child Wonders Why My Auntie Fell in the Sea at Hilo” originally appears in 1 Corinthians 12:21 (King James Version).

“Argyll Tour,” “In the Greenhouse,” “In the Park at Caserta,” and “The Earrings” are translations of poems by Eugenio Montale.

Quotations in “Aubade,” “Hawaii 9/11,” and “Tropical Garden” originally appear in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

“A Whale’s Pace” is an aural “translation” of a poem by Wislawa Szymborska.

“Bubble and Pop” and “What If I Buy You Lunch” began as Jorie Graham poems.

“Circulatory,” “If Blue,” “Lowcountry Chat,” and “Whidbey Island Spoils” were inspired by a weekly photo/poem exchange carried on with artist/author Pierr Morgan.

“Investment” began as a Lyn Hejinian poem.

Every line of “It Is Time to Explain Myself” originally appears in the 1856 edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

“Lightning” began as a William Carlos Williams poem.

“Lowcountry Chat” began as a Lori Anderson poem.

“Mockingbird” began as an Emily Dickinson poem.

Some phrases in “Muir’s Sailing” originally appear in John Muir’s *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*.

“No Souls” began as a William Butler Yeats poem.

“Salt Marsh Dawning” began as a David Micah Greenberg poem.

Quotations in “Scars” appeared in an IM (instant messaging exchange) with my brother.

“Shade” is a translation of a poem by Paul-Marie Verlaine.

“Sol, Sol” began as a Federico García Lorca poem.

“Storm Warning” began as a Tristan Corbière poem.

“The Ibis and the Polychaete” began as a Richard Wilbur translation of a poem by Charles Baudelaire.

“The Man Who Plays Piano at Nordstrom” was inspired by Anthony S. Abbott’s book *The Man Who*.

“The Shapes of Flowers” began as a John Keats poem.

Every line of “Tucked Behind an Ear Like an Ear of Corn” originally appears in Ange Mlinko’s book *Starred Wire*.

“Waking” began as an Alice Friman poem.

“Water Burning” began as a Sherod Santos translation of a poem by Mnasalcas.

Quotations in “Where We Are” originally appear in the 1860 edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

About the Author



Carol Peters is sixty some. In 2008, her chapbook, *Muddy Prints, Water Shine*, was released as #57 in the New Women's Voices Series from Finishing Line Press. She is Editorial Assistant at *The Gettysburg Review* and mentors students privately and at the Charleston School of the Arts. Visit her blog, <http://carolpeters.blogspot.com>, and her website, <http://carolpeters.org>. She lives in Charleston, South Carolina and Hakalau, Hawaii.